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Express-News: Metro and State

Neighbors applaud move to add facility to list

By Sonja Garza and Jerry Needham
San Antonio Express-News

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Residents who live in the shadow of the defunct R&H Oil Co. refinery across Somerset Road consider the proposed cleanup a long time coming.

"When I heard the news, I was, like, 'Thank God.' It's been that way for years," said Melissa Acosta, who lives about a block from the abandoned refinery.

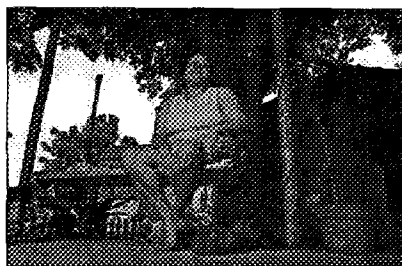
The 28-year-old schoolteacher can see the former oil company's corroded tanks from her front yard and considers the site an eyesore.

"Just looking at it, it's disgusting," she said. "I always told my roommate, 'Who knows what kind of diseases or threats to our health (it poses)?"

Irene H. Porter, 77, who lives across the street from the old refinery, said she's concerned about the health of her two great-granddaughters, given her home's proximity to the polluted site. The 5-year-old twins visit her nearly every day.

Porter said she hasn't noticed any health problems, but "if they clean it up, it's better."

Joe Soliz, an executive committee member for Communities Organized for Public Service, said the former R&H Oil Co. once was a flourishing business for the South Side.



Melissa Acosta, 28, enjoys the afternoon in her shaded back yard Thursday. Although Acosta has lived near the old R&H Oil Co. for about six years, she's glad that the refinery is a possible Superfund site. Photo by Jerry Lara/Express-News Photographer

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"But as you can tell today," he said, "it's somebody's garbage."

A broken chain-link gate fails to block the entrance of the abandoned refinery, consisting of a series of rusted oil tanks and decaying pipes.

Pipes, dozens of 55-gallon drums — some that officials say contain chlorinated solvents — and about 40 above-ground storage tanks of 5,000- to 400,000-gallon capacities, remain at the site.

Discarded tires and plastic buckets, some containing a black liquid, litter the grounds, along with the occasional puddle of black sludge.

Soliz, who grew up on the South Side, said the polluted area affects everything from the environment to property values.

"Would you buy a home here?" he asked.

The polluted site sits atop a sea of shallow groundwater pollution caused by Kelly AFB and other industries.

Many residents fear the contamination under their homes devalues their properties. But the Bexar Appraisal District concluded last year, after market studies on home sales in areas affected by the pollution, that "at the present time, there is no demonstrable negative market impact on property values as a result of groundwater contamination."

Mayor Ed Garza said the designation of the old gasoline refinery was great news, because the more assistance the city receives from the federal government to resolve environmental problems "the better off we'll be."

While community members applaud the EPA for moving toward cleanup of the abandoned refinery, Armando Quintanilla said he hopes Kelly doesn't use it as an excuse to shirk its cleanup responsibility.

"I hope it doesn't delay Kelly from proceeding full steam ahead," said Quintanilla, a former Kelly employee who moved from the area after living there 48 years.

"The EPA has known about the contamination in the neighborhoods since the '80s and to this date, there is no plan to clean up the contamination," said Quintanilla, secretary of the Center for Health and Environmental Justice and member of the Kelly AFB Restoration Advisory Board.

Councilman Enrique Martin, whose district includes Kelly AFB, said the city will not let the Air Force off the hook for final cleanup responsibility.

Kelly, with far worse pollution problems, did not land on the federal Superfund list, but EPA officials have said that's because the Air Force was standing ready to carry out the cleanup.

That's not the case with the R&H Oil site, where it may take years to track down and force responsible parties to reimburse the government, if they have resources to do so, officials said.

William Ryan, chief of environmental restoration at Kelly for the Air Force Base Conversion Agency, said of the base cleanup: "We're still responsible for what we're responsible for, and we'll move forward with our program."

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Staff Writer William Pack contributed to this report.

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